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ABSTRACT

This study examines research on public school leadership effectiveness, focusing specifically on the superintendent. It begins with a discussion of the historical mission to define leadership effectiveness, followed by a review of existing research on effective school districts and superintendents. The report also analyzes how superintendent effectiveness is defined and measured, concluding that this is one of the major shortcomings in the knowledge base. The report then details the obstacles that superintendents face in effectively managing a school system, including stability, the politicization of the profession, and superintendent and school board relations. Finally, the report presents suggestions for further research, which include addressing concerns regarding various operational definitions of effective leadership, examining the roles of the superintendent in their specific contexts, studying superintendent and school board relations, and providing information for preparing and recruiting effective educational leaders. (Contains 84 references.) (SM)

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THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Quest to Define Effective Leadership

Janet Y. Thomas

Report No. 55 / October 2001

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The Quest to Define Effective Leadership

Janet Y. Thomas

Johns Hopkins University

Report No. 55

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Every child has the capacity to succeed in school and in life. Yet far too many children, especially those from poor and minority families, are placed at risk by school practices that are based on a sorting paradigm in which some students receive high-expectations instruction while the rest are relegated to lower quality education and lower quality futures. The sorting perspective must be replaced by a "talent development" model that asserts that all children are capable of succeeding in a rich and demanding curriculum with appropriate assistance and support.

The mission of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) is to conduct the research, development, evaluation, and dissemination needed to transform schooling for students placed at risk. The work of the Center is guided by three central themes—ensuring the success of all students at key development points, building on students' personal and cultural assets, and scaling up effective programs—and conducted through research and development programs in the areas of early and elementary studies; middle and high school studies; school, family, and community partnerships; and systemic supports for school reform, as well as a program of institutional activities.

CRESPAR is organized as a partnership of Johns Hopkins University and Howard University, and supported by the National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students (At-Risk Institute), one of five institutes created by the Educational Research, Development, Dissemination and Improvement Act of 1994 and located within the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) at the U.S. Department of Education. The At-Risk Institute supports a range of research and development activities designed to improve the education of students at risk of educational failure because of limited English proficiency, poverty, race, geographic location, or economic disadvantage.

ABSTRACT

This study examines research on public school leadership effectiveness, focusing specifically on the superintendent. The author begins with a discussion of the historical mission to define leadership effectiveness, followed by a review of existing research on effective school districts and superintendents. The author also analyzes how superintendent effectiveness is defined and measured, and concludes that this is one of the major shortcomings in the knowledge base. The report then details the obstacles that superintendents face in effectively managing a school system—including instability, the politicization of the profession, and superintendent and school board relations. Finally, the author discusses implications for further research, and offers suggestions for expanding the research base.

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THE QUEST TO DEFINE EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The quest to define effective educational leadership in the United States dates back as far as public schooling itself. Since colonial times, the goals of American education have been shaped according to the dominant ideology, which inevitably influenced expectations for superintendent leadership. When the foundations for public schooling were laid, there were no specific guidelines for evaluating the effectiveness of school leaders. Yet, the quality of superintendent leadership was always an area of concern. Contemporary research rarely focuses on examining the effectiveness of educational leadership at the district level. As a consequence, examples of effective school system management are few in the educational literature. What is needed as we move into the 21st century is a set of guidelines, establishing a level of excellence toward which all public school administrators should strive.

Historical Concepts of Effective Leadership

Republican virtues and Protestant ethics served as the basis of public education in the 19th century. During that time, the purpose of schooling was widely seen to provide a civic education and mold the character of those who would ultimately become leaders of society. Religion was strongly linked to learning, and also set the standard for public school leadership. School leaders, like clergymen, were expected to exemplify strong moral character. Superintendents acted like ministers, governing public education according to "their interpretation of virtues required to lead a good life" (Leithwood & Duke, 1999, p. 56). Tyack and Hansot (1982) explained that during the early days of U.S. schooling: "... leadership in public education was often seen as a *calling* similar to that of church missionary, and in teachers' institutes, superintendents were sometimes as interested in converting to religion as in evangelizing for schooling" (p. 16).

Christian knowledge was valued over academic training for school administrators. Preparation for leadership was provided through religious sermons and teacher normal schools (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Training for the superintendency was almost nonexistent at the university level. Professional organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA) had few members, and conducted their conventions similar to religious retreats rather than gatherings of educational professionals (Cohen & Rosenberg, 1977; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

The concept of effective leadership began to change toward the end of the 19th century (Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). School officials reexamined the goals of

American education and searched for more efficient ways to govern public education. Scientific thought was seen to contradict the mythological nature of religion and "emphasized progress, human perfectibility and reason" (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 1995, p. 54). Equally influential, schools came to be seen as having the responsibility of responding to new social problems such as industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, which began to dominate social and political thought.

School reformers believed that the informal nature of education was not sufficient to meet the needs of a growing democracy. Unlike the aristocrats of character, the progressives aimed to "destroy the old ward-based and lay management of schools and to replace it with a new corporate model of decision making" (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, p. 106). Administrative professionals argued that scientific rationalism could be used to advance educational institutions and improve society as a whole. The efficient use of school resources, and scientific management then became the dominant definition of school effectiveness, influencing the leadership style of superintendents accordingly.[1]

As schooling became more formalized, superintendents began focusing on educational efficiency (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). The new progressives did not totally abandon the earlier religious foundations of schooling. However, professional things such as membership in the American Association of School Administrators and incorporating bureaucratic rules to exert authority became essential for superintendents (Tyack & Hansot).[2] During the progressive era superintendents:

> ...sought legitimacy through expertise rather than throughdeference to character or broad public participation in policy making. [They] linked in networks that combined university leaders with influential superintendents and foundation officials... transmuting numbers into norms, they shaped their preferred policies into a standard template of reform which they applied to state after state, district after district.... (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, p. 7)

The meaning of educational leadership was again challenged at the end of World War II. Reformers began advocating for a curriculum that would not only prepare students for a vocation, but also the challenges of everyday life. Curricula became less intellectual, emphasizing things such as "what kind of behavior was socially acceptable and how to adjust to group expectations" (Ravitch, 1983, p. 68). Some educational leaders argued that by accepting this model, public education had lowered its standards. Others held that public schools were failing to prepare students for the demands of modern society, and strongly advocated a life preparation education.

Unlike with the aristocrats of character and administrative progressives, both of which had large followings, ideas fragmented regarding concepts of educational effectiveness the 1940s and 1950s. Issues regarding who should be educated, what type of educational curriculum was appropriate, and who should act as the educators were at the center of educational debates. These prevailing issues, coupled with the educational equity movements of the 1960s, gradually shifted the focus in school leadership research away from superintendents and more toward school principals. The subsequent rise of the effective schools movement further reinforced the emphasis on local school leaders. This focus dominated educational effectiveness research throughout the late 20th century (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

Definitions of Superintendent Effectiveness

Since the effective schools movement, research on the influence of district administrators had been largely overlooked in school governance work. In 1983, a report entitled *A Nation At Risk* highlighted the mediocrity of American education and stimulated new interest in work on the quality and competency of public school administrators, particularly the chief executive officer (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The educational literature was subsequently flooded with data-free articles concerning effective school district management, which lasted through the 1980s to the mid 1990s. Review articles highlighted the need for public school reforms, emphasizing things such as charter schools, school vouchers, and decentralization. As a consequence, interest in research on school district governance dwindled and more emphasis was placed on leadership reform at the school level (Cuban, 1984; Hannaway & Talbert, 1993; Holdaway & Genge, 1995; Lezotte, 1989; Manasse, 1984; Monk, Nusser, & Roellke, 1998; Musella, 1995; Rutherford, 1985). These initiatives inadvertently directed attention away from the need for improvement in central office administration.

School effectiveness scholars recognized this shortcoming and advocated for future studies regarding the influence of top-level managers (Barr & Dreeben, 1983; Boyd & Crowson, 1981; Bridges, 1982; Crowson, 1987; Cuban, 1984; Murphy, 1989; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Pfeffer, 1984; Rowan, 1983). They argued that "if leadership has any impact, it should be evident at higher organizational levels, [where] there is more discretion in decisions and activities" (Pfeffer, 1984, p. 9). They further argued that it is "the failure to come up with satisfactory answers to questions about the impact of senior administrators that is the source of so much of our inability to understand school effects" (Musella, 1995, p. 223).

For instance, Salley (1980) conducted a study examining how superintendent's ratings of job priorities were influenced by operating circumstances and environmental constraints. The study gathered data on the influence of district size; board members; race, class, and gender; and tenure on superintendent's ratings of job priorities (Salley, 1980). The findings, however, provided no information regarding how, or if such priorities contributed to superintendents' ability to affect change, or to improve educational achievement. Similarly, Holdaway and Genge (1995) conducted a study regarding how effective superintendents understand their job functions. The sample included 15 CEOs, selected because they were perceived as effective leaders. However, the study lacked an operational measure of effectiveness, and offered ambiguous suggestions as to how effective CEOs administered their school system.

Musella (1995) took a different approach, examining how CEOs influenced school system culture. Conducted in Ontario, Musella's case studies aimed to identify those practices that changed district culture and performance effectiveness. The study provided useful information about improving the daily functioning of school system employees; setting priorities; and working with stakeholders, including community leaders, parents, students, and board members. Additionally, the cultural changes needed to improve operational effectiveness of a school system were described. However, the study did not link school system culture to improved student outcomes.

Leithwood, Steinbach, & Raun (1995) aimed to describe the problem solving practices of effective educational CEOs. Similar to Holdaway and Genge's research, a sample of CEOs were chosen because they were reported to have provided effective leadership, and displayed skills found common in expert problem solvers. This study used a problematic standard to determine leadership effectiveness and did not contribute to our understanding of how these processes impacted the students or the school system.

Studies that used an operational measure of effectiveness also contributed little to our understanding of effective school system management (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Murphy, Hallinger, & Peterson 1985). For example, Murphy and Hallinger (1986) conducted a study to describe leadership practices in Instructionally Effective School Districts (IESD). Effective school districts, according to Murphy and Hallinger, demonstrated (1) overall student achievement across subject areas, (2) growth and achievement over time, and (3) consistency in achievement across all sub-populations of students. Although focused on how instructional leadership is exercised by superintendents, no "uniformed picture of how instruction is coordinated and controlled" in IESD districts was offered (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986, p. 213).

In contrast, Johnson's (1996) study provides a detailed account of how superintendents exercise authority, and how constituents respond to particular leadership styles. Focusing on 12 newly appointed superintendents, Johnson gathered information from districts that varied in SES status, size, racial composition, and political climate. Although the reforms did not present student-level outcome measures, the study detailed what was found to work, and not work, when building the capacity for reform. Equally important, Johnson's work highlighted the contextual roles of the educational CEO, and how effectiveness is largely dependent on their ability to be efficient in each particular role.

Similarly, Kowalski (1995), in a volume entitled *Keepers of the Flame,* provided insights on the challenges of superintendents working in large urban systems. Kowalski discussed issues ranging from the politics of the urban superintendency to the effects of the position on one's personal life. However, the study did not offer advice to superintendents aiming to improve student achievement. Wimpelberg (1997) explains that although this study of big system CEOs was insightful it:

> does not offer a lot of information about [the superintendents] decisions, behaviors, or motivations concerning hiring central office colleagues or school principals, about their work on specific curricular, instructional, or facilities problem[s].... (p. 323)

Studies examining the role of the chief executive officer offer vague suggestions of effective leadership characteristics and have not linked leadership styles to district performance (Coleman & LaRocque, 1990; Holdaway & Genge, 1995; Johnson, 1996; Kowalski, 1995; Leithwood, Steinbach, & Raun, 1995; Musella, 1995; Musella & Leithwood, 1990; Wolf, 1987). Although the intent of these studies were not to examine superintendent effectiveness in the context of student growth and achievement, they implicitly suggest that factors such as job priorities, affects on instructional leadership, perceptions of effectiveness, influence on school district culture, and problem solving skills are leading factors in the quality of school system management. They further suggest that student achievement is not a primary variable when determining district-level leadership effectiveness.

Clearly, the above authors believe that when assessing the quality of school system leadership, the meaning of effectiveness is contextual. However, we can be certain that "at minimum, the term *effective* evokes notions of leadership that is exceptional, perhaps worth emulating, often in rare supply, or widely valued," and insomuch as educational leadership is concerned, district improvement will always be an important variable (Leithwood, 1995).

THE CHALLENGES OF SUPERINTENDENTS' LEADERSHIP

Understanding the challenges that face educational CEOs is an important part of improving this research area. While implementing reforms, superintendents must first build the capacity for change within a district. There are many obstacles that inhibit efforts to influence district reforms and improvements. Virtually every author in the field has argued that it is important for educational CEOs to understand the potential conflicts that are an inherent in public school administration. They have also pointed out that it is essential for school leaders to develop strategies that will guide them in responding to such issues. The key issues are superintendent instability, the politics of public school governance, and superintendent and school board relations.

Instability

Greater demand for accountability coupled with the increasing politicization of the superintendent has made superintendent turnover a major source of concern (Cunningham & Carter, 1997; Glass, 1992; Jackson & Cibulka, 1992; Kowalski, 1995; Ornstein, 1992; Weller, Brown, & Flynn, 1991). Data provided by the Council of Great City Schools indicated that during the 1985-86 school year, superintendents remained in their jobs for an average of 4 years. Later research demonstrated that this pattern continued through the 1990s (Glass, 1992; Kowalski, 1995, 1999; Jackson & Cibulka, 1992; Ornstein, 1991; Renchler, 1992). By 1999, the average tenure for urban superintendents had decreased to an average of 2.5 years—considerably lower than the national average of 6.2 years.[3]

Instability is often discussed as big city problem. However, studies conducted in rural districts demonstrate that high turnover is also a concern in those areas (Chance & Capps, 1990; Eaton, 1994; Eaton & Sharp, 1996; Glass, 1992; Ramirez & Guzman, 1999). Superintendents in rural districts are unlikely to encounter the challenges of large cities, yet many are dissatisfied with the status of the job, and are more likely to leave seeking better opportunities (Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996). A 1990 study on the opinions, status, and experiences of American public school educators showed that although small-town superintendents were satisfied overall in their jobs, they rated salary, fringe benefits, and job security as either fair or poor (American Research Service, 1990).

This trend is largely attributed to the changing political economy of the 1980s. Jackson & Cibulka (1992) have pointed out that interest in public education had a resurgence among business leaders during that time, with the goal of improving academic achievement

and, therefore, international competitiveness. Accordingly, more business leaders began to occupy positions on local boards, calling for greater accountability measures and more effective leadership from school administrators. When local business leaders demonstrated an interest in the problems of school district leadership, they won the support of local politicians and the news media (Jackson & Cibulka, 1992). As a result, "the inability to manage the growing demands for excellence [resulted] in leadership turnover and problems of superintendent recruitment" (p. 84).

Politics

The shifting racial composition of inner-city districts and the dramatic rise in African American and Hispanic populations challenged the *legitimacy* of local school governance and called for greater racial representation within top-level management (Jackson & Cibulka, 1992). The demand for racial representation made it easier for minority superintendents to move from one district to another, which further reinforced the turnover problem (Crowson & Boyd, 1992; Jackson & Cibulka, 1992; Kowalski, 1995; Williams, Moffett, & Newlin, 1987). Jackson and Cibulka (1992) explain that:

> In some cities demands for community control of schools were made, with particular urgency by some African-American leaders. Urban school systems responded to these political demands for representativeness, typically by reducing White dominance of urban school boards. Some cities changed the size or selection process for their board, and a small number politically decentralized to create multiple boards. (p. 74)[4]

The politics of race created new challenges for African American superintendents as well. While White administrators were challenged regarding racial and cultural sensitivity, African American superintendents "believed that their authority [was] being questioned by the White power structure in the community" (Kowalski, 1995; Rist, 1990, p. 13). Furthermore, when African Americans attained these positions, they inherited districts that already had "deep-seated, nearly intractable problems" (Kowalski, 1995; Rist, 1990, p. 13; Scott, 1980). Consequently, they often became disenchanted with the pressures of managing over-burdened, financially troubled districts, leading to a large number of vacancies (Goldstein, 1992; Jordan, 1993).

When superintendents have been involuntarily removed from office, their removal has been attributed to political issues and pressing issues with board members. For instance, Metzger (1997) investigated the factors that contributed to involuntary dismissal of 39 California CEOs in the 1995-96 school year. The study cited problems related to personnel

issues and power struggles with board members as primary reasons. Board member issues included concerns such as members with special interests, disagreements regarding roles and responsibilities, board members advocating particular programs, projects, or policies, and community issues (Metzger, 1997).[5]

In situations where personnel concerns prevailed, Metzger found that board member politics remained the underlying reason. This was particularly evident in instances when "termination, transfer, or evaluation of employees became an issue between the board member and the superintendent, or where district staff 'played parties' with the board and undermined the superintendent in some way" (Metzger, 1997, p. 21). Metgzer also listed financial problems and issues with unions and collective bargaining as contributing factors to firing school superintendents, and "generally result[ing] in turmoil in the district" (p. 22).

Superintendent and School Board Relations

As more emphasis was placed on effective school district leadership, the relationship between school boards and their superintendents became more critical (Allison, Allison, & McHenry, 1995; Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992; Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986; McCurdy, 1992;). The dynamics of this interaction is the single most important factor contributing to their ability to effectively govern the district (Bailey, 1982; Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Chance & Chapps, 1990; McCurdy & Hymes 1992; Nygren, 1992; Shannon, 1989; Smoley, 1999). When the partnership is strained, programs often fail, morale is weakened, mistrust builds, and political power blocks come to the foe (Norton et al., 1996). When these issues arise, they present major obstacles to establishing long-term goals and achieving intended outcomes.

School boards and superintendents both recognize that a strong working relationship is essential for providing effective leadership (Glass, 1992; Grady & Bryant, 1991; Trotter & Downey, 1989). A 1992 study asked superintendents to rank the conditions that challenged their ability to effectively carry out their functions (Glass, 1992). Although the typical concerns of funding, accountability, and planning and goal setting were identified, superintendents ranked administrator/board relations as a leading barrier. Research on the experiences of school board members revealed similar findings. In these studies, board members also acknowledged relations with superintendents as a key factor in the ability to fulfill their duties (Grady & Bryant, 1991; Norton et al., 1996).

One obstacle to building successful partnerships between school boards and superintendents is poor communication (Chance & Capps, 1990; Glass, 1993; Grady &

Bryant, 1991; McCurdy & Hymes, 1992; Smoley, 1999). *The 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency* further illustrates this point. The study included survey responses of 2,262 superintendents from school districts across the nation. When asked how much time they spend in direct contact with their board members, 62% of superintendents reported three hours or less per week in direct communication (Glass, Bojork, & Brunner, 2000). Another study reported that board members complained that with the exception of board meetings, they had no direct contact with superintendents (Glass, 1993).

Some scholars have attributed communication problems to the leadership style of superintendents. They assert that superintendents often manage in an autonomous fashion, leaving board members feeling alienated and disregarded (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Kowalski, 1995). Superintendents cite a range of other problems such as superintendents did not keep the board informed of what's going on in the district, wanted things their way, took no suggestions from the board, got mad if challenged or disagreed with, tried to intimidate, withheld important information, and did not give clear answers when asked important questions (Grady & Bryant 1991; Norton et al., 1996).

The lack of clarity in roles, expectations, and scope of authority also contributed to major disagreements between boards of educations and their CEOs. This is largely related to the overlap in responsibilities, particularly in the areas of policymaking, staff and administrator evaluation, and fiscal management (Norton et al., 1996). Responding to this issue, the National School Board Association (NSBA), and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) collaborated to clarify role expectations between the two entities. The product of this effort, published in 1994, defined the board's primary role as "the establishment of policy" with all other related functions (NSBA & AASA, 1994). The superintendent's role, they pointed out, should be one of the chief executive officer, serving as educational advisor and leader of the school district (NSBA & AASA, 1994). Although this report outlined the specific job functions for the two parties, it did little to address the overall issue of role negotiation.

Generally, sharing these role functions is mutually acceptable. A problem usually arises when the superintendent is an educational professional and board members "are not professionally trained as educators or in board diplomacy." (Cassel, 1999; Norton et al., 1996, p. 122). As chief executive officer, a superintendent's primary responsibility is to make recommendations regarding educational issues in the district. Untrained board members, lacking in educational expertise, will often disagree with the superintendent's recommendations, thus overriding decisions and implementing strategies of their own (Trotter & Downey, 1989). This is a major area of concern for superintendents, in that boards

who are unhappy with their decisions can terminate their employment at any time (Metzger, 1997; Zirkel, 1997).

This problem is further exacerbated when there is a clash of leadership styles between the two parties. Organizational scholars believe that superintendents must be a "good fit" for the culture and decision-making styles of board members (Katz, 1993; Maduakolam & Bailey, 1999). They contend that when the individual style of the superintendent conflicts with the board's organizational behaviors, the working relationship is strained. Conversely, when the working styles are complimentary, they can have a harmonious, team-like partnership.

The public school superintendency is a highly political and conflict-ridden position. In order to make persons filling superintendencies more effective, more emphasis must be placed on attracting valuable top-level administrators and less on external pressures, which have taken precedence over the critical need for high-quality leadership. These issues have made it difficult to recruit and retain competent administrators, particularly in troubled school systems. It is important that issues such as stability, CEO and board relations, and the politics of the profession become part of the school reform agenda.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The literature on superintendent effectiveness remains sparse and leaves much to be desired. Research continues to lack a clear definition and agreed upon measures of what constitutes effective school system leadership, and offers little information on how superintendents can improve their leadership styles. To expand and improve this line of scholarship, more information is needed regarding the practices of superintendents in high-performing vs. low-performing districts. Researchers must conduct information-rich studies, which includes multi-level, longitudinal, mixed methods case studies of educational CEOs in a variety of settings in order to enhance our understanding of what it takes to effectively manage a school district. To address these questions, future research should focus on four specific areas:

- addressing concerns regarding various operational definitions of effective leadership,
- examining the roles of the superintendent in their specific contexts,
- studying superintendent and school board relations, and
- providing information for preparing and recruiting effective educational leaders.

Suggestions for Future Studies

As noted above, a wide range of studies on the differential effectiveness of superintendents are needed. However, none will move the field forward without clearer operational definitions of effectiveness than in the past. Most educational professionals will concur that improving district ethos and school culture are inherently useful when assessing the impact of school system leadership. However, additionally, potentially more fine-grained and closer-to-the-student measures are now available. In particular the evolution of increasingly credible measures of clearly desirable student outcomes (ex., norm- and criterion-referenced tests and student performance assessments such as those used in Kentucky and Maryland) in various content areas are now available. Student attendance, graduation rates, and college going rates net of community socioeconomic status are all outcomes on which both parents and the tax-paying public might seek as accountability.

The simultaneous evolution of increasingly powerful and inexpensive computing systems, combined with such quantitative tools as large-scale, education-specific databases (ex., PowerSchool) and statistical programs that can more accurately model the multi-level nature of data within schools and school systems (ex., Hierarchical Linear Modeling; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1994) provide unprecedented and greatly underused opportunities to study superintendent actions and their long-term quantitative effects. The evolution of increasingly sophisticated qualitative methods matches the progress quantitative tools, and offers avenues for mixed method studies of superintendent effectiveness (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1999).

Even when leadership effectiveness is measured in terms of outcomes, more specific information is needed to contribute to our understanding of school system management (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986). Like other organizational managers, the educational CEO's job is highly contextual, and leadership effectiveness is highly sensitive to that context. Educational superintendents must simultaneously function as educational leaders, politicians, and organizational managers to influence any significant change in their districts. A clear understanding of how successful CEOs function in each role is needed to move this research forward.

With only a few exceptions (Johnson, 1996; Konnert & Augenstein, 1990), researchers have not examined the intertwining roles of superintendents, and the influence these various functions has on leadership abilities. Regarding the contextual roles of superintendents, Johnson (1996) explained, "The complexity of this environment illustrates why a lengthy list of leadership traits, however derived, cannot explain what makes for good leadership" (p. 19).[6] She further explained that "...superintendents who aspire to lead rarely find clear explanations of what they can expect from constituents or what they should do" (p. xi).

As with the teacher effectiveness (Brophy & Good, 1986) and school effectiveness (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000) research bases, a great deal of attention needs to be paid to contextual issues. Skills required to lead a K-8 district in a rural, largely monolingual state could plausibly be expected to vary from those required to lead a 200,000+ student district that serves students from pre-K through community college in a highly racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse district. Working effectively for all children with a united, reform-focused board presumably requires quite different skills from achieving the same effects with a badly divided, politicized board. Yet studies of any methodological type clearly drawing those distinctions are lacking.

New research on school system governance should aim to better prepare superintendents for the profession and provide useful information for educational administration programs. Information disseminated in leadership programs today is neither "intellectually challenging [nor] useful to practitioners" (Johnson, 1996, p. 286; Murphy, 1992). This is not to suggest that such research can resolve the myriad of problems in troubled school systems. These studies will only provide information on how superintendents can govern more effectively. Raising critical questions about the research on school district leadership is the first step in responding to this issue. One can hope that as the next generation of studies emerges, researchers and practitioners will further appreciate a much larger, more sophisticated field.

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NOTES

[1] Aristocrats of Character and Administrative Professionals are terms borrowed from David Tyack's 1989 *Managers of Virtue*.

[2] Also see the 1933 NEA Department of Superintendents, Educational Leadership: Programs and Possibilities. Washington, DC (pp. 159-278, 325-330, 334-335).

[3] S. Lewis. The Council of Great City Schools, personal communication, September 12, 2001.

[4] Also see D. Land (in press). *Local School Boards under Review: An Examination of Literature on Their Role and Effectiveness.*

[5] This issue will be discussed in more detail in the section on Superintendent and School Board Relations.

[6] Johnson's study also examined superintendents in the context of the times, locale, and organizational structure.

CRESPAR

Johns Hopkins University
Center for Social Organization of Schools
3003 North Charles Street – Suite 200
Baltimore MD 21218
410-516-8800 / 410-516-8890 fax

Howard University
2900 Van Ness Street, NW
Washington DC 20008
202-806-8484 / 202-806-8498 fax